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# Through Hamlet, with Hamlet, against Hamlet: Giovanni Testori's Translation of the Ultimate Character

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## A Complex Artist

Giovanni Testori (1923–1993) can be defined as an atypical figure in the Italian cultural panorama of the second half of the twentieth century. Although critics welcomed and praised his artistic qualities when his works appeared to be in line with the prevailing intellectual currents in the 1960s and in the early 1970s, they subsequently found it more difficult to follow and understand his artistic developments (Cappello 140–41). As explained by the poet and scholar Carlo Bo, perhaps the best and most reliable connoisseur of Testori's work, this was also Testori's own doing: he wanted to stand alone and avoid artistic schools and currents, remain unscathed by polemical attacks and, after his 1977 conversion, saw himself in the role of a Catholic artist constantly "against the tide" (Bo 99).<sup>1</sup> However, this controversial artist (Cascetta 1995, 129) is an atypical figure in at least two more interesting regards: his multidimensional artistic nature and an overt obsession with Hamlet. Tracing Testori's lifelong relationship with Shakespeare's hero, and focusing on Testori's intense dramatic and poetic production in the early 1970s, this article will reflect on the evolution of Hamlet into an ultimate character, whom Testori endowed with mythological and anthropological dimensions. The intention is to deconstruct the remarkable journey of Testori's Hamlet, defining it within the literary and cultural scenario of the last decades of the twentieth century. The main aim is to understand in what ways Testori's relationship with Hamlet has emerged through poetry and to what extent it should be regarded as translational.

## Hamlet's Haunting Presence

Testori's extraordinary versatility extended to painting, cinema and literature; and, within literature, to essay writing, fiction, theatre and poetry. This led him to blur, exceed and overlap the boundaries between different arts and codes, as well as between literary genres. Thus, distinctions between genres became less and less meaningful to him, so that his multiple activities tended to merge into one single

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<sup>1</sup>Literal translations of poetry and translations of criticism are mine, unless otherwise stated.

vocation and quest, with works often halfway between theatre, poetry and painting (Bo 31). Throughout his prolonged, and mostly desperate, quest, Testori appears to have been constantly chasing, tailing and striving to incarnate the splenetic prince. It is no exaggeration to define Hamlet as an immanent presence across the whole of his literary production, certainly like no other literary or dramatic character. It is true that Testori explored other classic models and texts, like *Macbeth*, *Oedipus* and Alessandro Manzoni's *Promessi sposi*, but they did not become part of the writer's world, unlike Hamlet, who is present in almost all that he has done (Doninelli 50).

Testori's lifelong relationship with *Hamlet* can be traced back to the war years, when at the age of twenty he spent time in a remote valley in the Alps and together with other young friends decided to try his hand at staging drama, ambitiously starting with Shakespeare's tragedy:

Il programma era ambizioso: volevamo allestire l'*Amleto* di Shakespeare presso il santuario di Campoè, che si trova in mezzo ai boschi. La scena fu posta tra i due pilastri del cancello del santuario, con i fari di due automobili, dietro, che la illuminavano. Era piuttosto suggestivo, devo dire, nonostante la pochezza degli attori, soprattutto nella scena del funerale di Ofelia che noi avevamo trasformato in una specie di processione. Con la resina degli alberi avevamo fatto delle torce [. . .]. Fu un successo. (Doninelli 43)

[The programme was ambitious: we wanted to stage Shakespeare's *Hamlet* at the shrine of Campoè, which is in the middle of woods. The scene was set between the two pillars of the gate of the shrine, with the lamps of two cars illuminating it from backstage. It was fairly suggestive, I must admit, notwithstanding the poor quality of our acting. The scene of Ophelia's funeral in particular was remarkably staged as a sort of procession. We had made torches with the tree resin [. . .]. It was a roaring success].

After this juvenile venture, Testori overtly took up the figure of Hamlet three further times, each time breathing new life into it and new dimensions. Testori himself warned his audience and readers, however, that his are very personal and provocative approaches to Shakespeare's hero:

rivisitazioni [. . .] imbastardimenti [. . .] strozzamenti [. . .], certo delle derelitte e parzialissime prove che il qui scrivente ha tentato d'eguire su e perfino contro (egli lo sa, lo sa benissimo) il sublime esemplare. (Testori 1983)

[re-interpretations [. . .] bastardisations [. . .] strangulations [. . .] undoubtedly miserable and very partial efforts attempted by the author writing here on, and even against, the sublime model (he [Hamlet] knows it, knows it very well)].

He started in 1970 when he wrote the screenplay for a film, *Amleto*, for which he also drew the costume sketches. He was to have directed the film himself, but the project was abandoned, and the text remained practically unknown until 2002, when it was published and edited by Fulvio Panzeri. The screenplay is obviously

based on Shakespeare's text, although it is a deliberate bastardisation and strangulation of it. The scene moves from Denmark to a gloomy and forlorn valley in the Italian Alps; there is a homosexual relationship between the protagonist and Horatio; and Hamlet kills his mother Gertrude and finally commits suicide, just to mention some of the main thematic transformations introduced. Although respecting the structure and formal characteristics of a screenplay, it is a very peculiar type of work, a fluctuating magma, where pictorial, narrative, cinematic, poetic and dramatic elements touch and overlap.

As Testori pointed out later, this experience was a necessary step for him, paving the way to the more radical and explosive rereading of the Shakespearean hero in *L'Ambleto*, as the low-ranking ham from Lombardy, foul-mouthed and violently desperate, yet crying out for help. The protagonist's role, Ambleto, was successfully played by Franco Parenti in 1972 and the play became one of the highly debated literary cases of the early 1970s in Italy, because it was such an original and provocative text. Set in Lomazzo, Brianza, and written in a virtual language, a language pastiche based on current Italian, but influenced by Milanese dialect, French, Latin, Spanish, English and media terminology, *Ambleto* presents a radically different protagonist. Unlike Shakespeare's hero, he is not an intellectual torn between action on the one hand, and conscience and thought on the other. Ambleto is the young gipsy actor who does not play, but rather incarnates "the splenetic prince", as Testori often refers to him. Ambleto desperately questions life to the point of cursing much more than evil: he curses life itself, wishing to totally regress into nothingness, into the moment preceding conception (Cascetta 1983, 101). Testori found it impossible to deal with one single genre *tout court* and the result is a striking mix, not only linguistically. The text is a composite in which diverse genres and styles come together: Elizabethan tragedy, medieval invective poetry, baroque moralistic literature, love poetry, melodrama (Cascetta 1983, 100).

Ten years later, in 1983, Testori took up Hamlet again in *Post-Hamlet*. The title could suggest a greater stress on Shakespeare's tragedy, but in fact this adaptation offers an even more radical and extreme rereading. After the Shakespearean hero of vengeance, doubt and silence and after the anarchical evangelism of the anti-hero Ambleto, this third Hamlet, although actually absent from the text, is a positive hero who accepts sacrifice and martyrdom to guide a forlorn community towards meeting the Father again. This Hamlet becomes a *figura Christi* and the whole story of the murder of Hamlet's father is emblematically portrayed as the killing of the Father by a globalised society where science and technology are worshipped.

Besides these three major encounters, which fundamentally belong to the dramatic genre, we can say that Testori pursues Hamlet throughout his life and through various genres, starting with his poetic works. As we will see, *Hamlet* is generally a subtle and pervasive presence, sometimes through direct references. An interesting example of first level reference is provided by the tenth poem of *Ossa mea* (1981–1982), where a striking accumulation of images begins with both direct allusions, such as the proper name of the hero Amleto, and indirect allusions to kingdoms, sceptres, science books and finally spectres:

I regni,  
le formiche,  
I ragni,  
le volpi,  
le cicale,  
i pegni,  
gli oranghi,  
le sirene capitali,  
i tanghi,  
i libri della scienza,  
gli scettri,  
gli spettri,  
Amleto e l'amuleto

[Kingdoms, / ants, / spiders, / foxes, / cicadas, / pawns, / oranges, / capital  
mermaids, / tangos, / science books, / sceptres, / spectres, / Hamlet and  
amulet]

As Panzeri shows, explicit references to the emblematic figure of Hamlet can be found also in the lyric cycles of the 1980s dedicated by Testori to the painters Arnulf Rainer and Samuele Gabai (Testori 2002, 191–92). Referring to Rainer's crucifixions, the poet reflects once more on Hamlet's death, this time demanding a reply in his dialogue with Christ:

Orazio  
stringe a sé  
il Prencce  
e piange:  
é morto,  
ecco  
non soffre più. . .  
Ma,  
Tu?  
Rispondi:  
Tu?  
(Testori 2002, 192)

[Horatio / holds the Prince / in his arms / and cries: / he is dead / you see / he  
does not suffer any longer. . . / But, / You? / Reply: / You?]

In Testori's last poems, written a few months before his death for a collection of engravings by Gabai, once again both Shakespeare's Hamlet and his offspring Ambaleto are evoked. Here they function as an emblematic reminder of how human beings are made of ash, but also as the ultimate image of life itself:

La muta crepa  
della crapa,  
la crapa,

la sua crepa,  
il frantumarsi  
degli ossi arsi  
nella man d'Amleto...

Amleto  
o, così vicino com'è  
a Lombardia, Ambleto?  
D'una vita  
comunque  
il resto, il testo  
e il final feto...

(Testori 2002, 192)

[The silent crack / of the skull, / the skull, / its crack, / the cracking / of  
parched bones / in Hamlet's hand... / Hamlet / or as close as he is / to  
Lombardy, Ambleto? / Of a life / anyway / the remains, the text / and the  
final foetus...]

### The Early 1970s

In the poetic works of the early 1970s, the poet's ongoing dramatic monologue appeared to be most haunted by Hamlet. These were fertile years for Testori, representing a full-grown phase in his artistic production: he started painting again and, on the literary side, he produced a number of poems, besides works of theatre and fiction. In 1970, when he was working on the screenplay *Amleto*, he published *Per sempre* [*Forever*], a collection of lapidary love poems, almost motets, that stylistically and thematically form an ideal trilogy with *Alain* and with the unpublished poems of *A te*. A year after the staging of *L'Ambleto*, in 1972, Testori published a poem which is often regarded as his best, "Nel Tuo sangue" ["In Your Blood"], which was awarded the Etna-Taormina Prize in 1975. In December 1974, some poems from *A te* and other lyric texts taken from *L'Ambleto* were read out on alternating occasions in the second part of the theatrical performance *Il poeta e l'interprete* [*The Poet and the Interpreter*], a performance dedicated to Testori by his friend and director Carlo Cotti. Through the Cotti performance, the vital dialogue between theatre and poetry in Testori's literary quest is publicly acknowledged (Testori 1997, 1520–21).

With *Per sempre* love acquires a totalising dimension for Testori, to the point of turning into the quest for an absolute experience, almost an unquenchable desire for wholeness and perpetuity (Cappello 76). Similarly, the character of Hamlet also undergoes a striking evolution, first in the screenplay, but even more in *L'Ambleto*. Like Testori, Ambleto is tormented by questions about the meaning of life and birth, as he asks why we enter the world like this, why the blood of birth is eternally multiplied in our conscience, or why, in the end, love itself is reduced to eternal blood and pain. These questions are obsessively shouted out again and again by Testori/Amleto/Ambleto, expressing excruciating unease, almost an

existential vertigo (Bo 26–27). Amblecto's desperate reading of our human existence is a crucial step in Testori's spiritual quest and paves the way for "Nel Tuo sangue". In this poem, the poet's existential doubt becomes even more extreme, to the point of becoming a hand-to-hand combat between God and him as a representative human being. Amblecto's yelling turns into the poet's blasphemous prayer, which on the one hand evokes Rimbaud and, on the other, Matthias Grünewald's agonising paintings. This time, a man provocatively addresses God, but God remains deaf and absent. All this leads to an intricate web of explicit references, unmistakable allusions, as well as innumerable echoes in Testori's theatrical and poetic works during these years. At the centre of this web stands Hamlet, whose pervading influence branches out on a structural level and a thematic level. Structurally, Testori's theatrical texts are fundamentally static and find their expressive form in the monologue. As Testori himself explained, the closer tragedies get to the immutable core of existence, the less dependent they become on structural elements, like their historical setting, plot dynamism or multiplication of characters. According to Testori, action and characters can even be paradoxically increased, as in the Elizabethan tragedy, but still become nothing more than a "multiple voiced monologue" (Testori 1996, 40). In *L'Amblecto* Testori at last finds his own most genuine poetic form, which is the dramatic monologue.

At the same time, Testori's poetry tends to stress and increase its dramatic dimension. As Bo comments, "Testori cerca antagonisti [. . .] quando scrive versi, la sua poesia è una poesia drammatica" (Bo 57) [Testori needs antagonists [. . .] when he writes poetry, his poetry is dramatic]. This becomes even more noticeable in "Nel Tuo sangue". The centre of "Nel Tuo sangue" is an elusive and unapproachable God that the poet provocatively bombards with questions and harsh recriminations. The emotional recurrence of the second person pronoun would imply a dialogue, but the addressee's unwillingness to listen and reply actually prevents any form of communication. Thus, the *I*, who often becomes *we*, representing the condition of all those who are seeking and questioning, can only descend back into his bitter and sharp monologue (Scorrano 221). In the end, the dialogue is only feigned and does not reach any answer, but rather highlights the poet's core question, painstakingly reiterating it (Cascetta 1983, 96).

### The Father-Son Theme

Intertextual allusions to, and thematic echoes of, Hamlet are numerous in Testori's poetry. Here we will zoom in, narrowing the focus to the texts of the early 1970s, and following one red thread in particular. By the early 1970s, Testori's Hamlet had evolved rapidly and the web of intertextual references and echoes in texts from those years had become quite complex. In other words, when tracing the influence of Hamlet on Testori's poetic works, we should not forget that the point of reference cannot be limited to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, but must include the Hamlet of Testori's 1970 screenplay, as well as, obviously, *L'Amblecto*. The father-son relationship is a topos throughout Testori's writing and a recurring theme in his poetic

works even before 1970. It first appears in *Trionfi* [*Triumphs*] of 1965 and then in *L'amore* [*Love*] of 1968, where it is foreshadowed by the relationship between the older poet and his young lover, and where it is often metaphorically reversed, with the poet and the lover continuously exchanging roles (Cappello 73). Obviously, the father-son relationship is an important element in *Hamlet* as well and Testori himself saw it as the crucial thematic nucleus of Shakespeare's tragedy. As such, it became one of the main targets of his rereading, in the screenplay first, and then more radically in *L'Ambleto*. In Shakespeare's tragedy the relationship between Hamlet and his dead father is always characterised by reverent and respectful love. The appearance of the ghost strengthens the consensus between father and son about seeking a common vengeance and the re-establishment of order and harmony. By contrast, in Testori's 1970 screenplay, the relationship with the dead father becomes one of love and hate. Hamlet is full of resentment, mostly because his father has died without helping him to understand the reason for his sudden death. Even worse than that, the father has never explained his reason for giving him birth and life in such a squalid world. When the father appears, it is not as Shakespeare's awesome and majestic spectre, but a disgusting and pitiful mass of decomposing flesh, a sort of enormous foetus. Roles have grotesquely reversed: the father contracts into a foetus and the son kneels down, lifts and holds the foetus up in his outstretched arms, as a parent would a child. The grafting and the artistic cross-fertilisation between Testori's poetic imagery and his pursuit of Hamlet begins thus.

In the parallel scene in *L'Ambleto*, it is the protagonist who undergoes an extraordinary metamorphosis. He feels that he has become a trace of sperm, entering his father's body again and regressing back to the very moment before he was conceived. He can hear his father's voice, asking for revenge but also ordering his son to save "la sovrana piramida dell'ordeno e del potere" [the sovereign pyramid of order and power]. This time, however, the son's reaction is one of open antagonism towards his father, or rather towards all the fathers and the awful system of power and corruption they have founded. From that moment, *Ambleto* aims for the total destruction of the pyramid, including "l'Unico e Unichissimo che ce sta sù, in la cima" [the only One, the very only One, who sits on it, on its top]. *Ambleto*'s furious despair and anger develops into the blasphemous prayer of "Nel Tuo sangue". When his mother, who was his only gleam of hope for achieving a new reality based on love, also appears to be hopelessly guilty and conniving, *Ambleto*, unlike the Shakespearean hero, kills Gertruda and then commits suicide (Giuliani 2006, 3).

Awareness of the complex evolution of the father-son topos can throw new light on the appreciation of Testori's poetry in these years. In the following poem from *Per sempre* the anguished appeal to the beloved lover pivots around the father-son relationship and the semantic expressionism of the text is clearly fertilised by Hamlet. The short poem opens with the king's crying, which evokes the disarming tears of the decomposing spectre-foetus of the father in the screenplay *Ambleto*. At the same time, however, it also recalls the soldiers who keep guard in the opening scene



of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and who are the first to meet the king's ghost. However, this is a scene left out of the screenplay. We encounter the throne, the robe, the crown and the ermine, all metonymies for corrupting and pervasive power. The invitation is to leave all that and to regress, to go backwards into the beloved's arms and become a child and a son again. In this way, the subtle reversal of roles is re-proposed, which, as we have seen, is a recurring theme in Testori's poetics.

Al pianto del re  
che può offrire  
un semplice soldato?  
  
Lascia il tuo trono,  
deponi il manto, la corona,  
l'ermellino.  
Così, senza più niente,  
ritorni in braccio a me:  
sei figlio,  
principe,  
mio erede,  
mio bambino.

(Testori 1997, 783)

[To the king's crying / what can be offered / by an infantryman? // Leave your throne, / lay down the robe, the crown, / the ermine. / Like that, with anything left, / you can come back into my arms: / you are the son, / the prince, / my heir, / my child.]

In the following short text from *A te* of 1972–73, the quest for the father and for answers clearly stressed by the 1970 screenplay, and dramatically emphasised in *L'Ambleto*, in contrast to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, merges with harsh disillusionment with the mother as the last symbol of hope:

Stai cercando tuo padre,  
non guardare in tua madre.  
  
É qui,  
che la morte ha lasciato  
come legno  
il tuo cuore,  
il mio segno, il tuo fiato.

(Testori 1997, 888)

[You are looking for your father / don't look into your mother. // It is here, / that death has turned to wood / your heart, / my mark, / your breath.]

Echoes of Hamlet's anguished love-hate relationship with the father/fathers, as it surfaces through both the screenplay and *L'Ambleto*, also resonates in this further poem from *A te*:

Negli occhi con cui mi guardi  
c'è più dolore,  
più odio per tuo padre  
o c'è più amore?

(Testori 1997, 890)

[In your eyes looking at me / is there more pain, / more hatred for your  
father / or more love?]

### The Metaphor of the Fox

In other texts, the father-son topos is at times developed and made more complex through other recurring metaphors. The following poem from *A te*, for example, opens with the extended metaphor of the fox that attempts to leave its den to enter the world, but is immediately frightened and withdraws back into it. The image expresses frustrated attempts to come to terms with life and reality.<sup>2</sup> In this sense it also echoes Hamlet's quest for answers to his doubts about the meaning of birth and life, as well as his insurmountable uneasiness in accepting corruption and power.

Il tuo muso di volpe  
che usciva per un momento  
dalla tana  
e poi subito spaurito  
rientrava  
era quello di un figlio  
nato per caso  
che non voleva capire  
d'essere in questa terra  
un disperato, un evaso.

(Testori 1997, 934)

[Your fox muzzle / that for a moment was leaving / its den / then would  
immediately go back / frightened / was that of a child / born by accident /  
who refused to understand / he was on this earth / a wretch, a fugitive.]

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<sup>2</sup>The web of intertextual references opened up by Testori's development of the metaphorical value of the fox is clearly quite intricate and complex. The fox appears in many pieces of literature across ages and cultures. It is mostly associated with cunning and deceit, but also determined and persevering personalities. In Italy, in particular, where translations and adaptations of the fables from both Aesop and Phaedrus are popular, the stereotypical image of the fox haunts the national collective imagination. Niccolò Machiavelli's *Principe* is a good example where the fox incarnates the essential Machiavellian qualities for a successful Prince: to be cunning, determined and without scruples. There is also the character of the fox in Carlo Collodi's *Pinocchio*. At the same time, the Italian cultural scene in the second half of the twentieth century was also influenced by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince*, which presents a much more positive image of the fox as a wise creature that teaches the young prince the fundamental values of friendship. Perhaps, a closer connection to Testori's idiosyncratic development of the metaphor can be found in an almost contemporary novel by Ignazio Silone, *La volpe e le camelie* [*The Fox and the Camelias*], which centres on a double hide-and-seek story and ends with the ultimate sacrifice by a character who is at the same time both seeker and victim.

The metaphor of the fox has deeper echoes and layers of meaning if read within the context of Testori's writing of these years. The fox is only incidentally present in *Hamlet* in the closing line of Act 4, Scene 2 (Shakespeare 2006, 360), but already introduces a striking association. On the surface, Hamlet's "Hide fox, and all after" is just the continuation of his feigned madness, which in this scene is specifically aimed at bewildering Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. At a metaphorical level, however, as K. Deighton underlines, it is "an allusion to the game of hide and seek, in which one of the players, called the fox, hides, and all the rest have to go after him and find out his hiding-place" (Shakespeare 1919). The metaphor of the fox is not present in Testori's 1970 screenplay, but it appears twice in *Per sempre*, first associated with snow and soft winter landscapes, and then with the idea of hunting and desperate retreat to the besieged kennel to die (Testori 1997, 754 and 832). However, it is in *L'Ambleto* that the metaphor is fully developed and turned into a major symbol. The fox is first mentioned by *il Franzese*, the character who replaces Horatio and who is clearly in tender love with the protagonist, when he tries to encourage Ambleto during his vertiginous regression into a trace of sperm. *Il Franzese* invites his friend to remember how the fox had also once lost all hope. He does not finish the sentence, but the fox is clearly evoked as a symbol of endurance and hope. After that, the fox is at the centre of Ambleto's sweet memory of his first meeting with *il Franzese*: as Ambleto tells his mother, they first met on an extraordinary winter evening in France. It was a landscape full of silence and snow, and he was longing for the ultimate peace and the wish to be buried there, when the young friend, as beautiful as an angel, appeared to him carrying an injured fox in his arms. It had been shot and abandoned by a hunter, but he had heard its crying and had rescued it, fondly soothing it. Moreover, the fox appears again in the very last dialogue of the play when Ambleto is dying: he has fallen from the throne and is grasping the legs of *il Franzese*, whom he addresses as the "false son" who is more real and true than if he had been his actual son. For his part, *il Franzese* calls him "Pater meus de me, meus et per sempre" [my Father, Father of mine, forever mine]. The use of Latin emblematically emphasises the solemnity of this final message, which concludes the tormented reversal of roles. Ambleto has achieved his goal and the pyramid has collapsed, sweeping away his dead father's will, and with it any other paternal figure, starting from the very top of the pyramid, God the Father. Amleto/Ambleto has become an orphan. However, this time it has been necessary for him to destroy his own life, as revealed by the total identification of Hamlet with the fox: "sta vorta la volpe ha dovuto morire" [this time the fox had to die]. Paradoxically, only now that he has become an orphan of all fathers and has provoked utter annihilation, even the annihilation of his own existence, can Hamlet attain an ideal father-son relationship.

The father-son topos is also at the very centre of the "blasphemous prayer" of "Nel Tuo sangue". Whereas in the concluding dialogue of *L'Ambleto* an ideal father-son relationship appeared to be possible, albeit outside this world, in the following poem, instead, the continual reversal of father-son roles reaches its extreme development, losing any direction and meaning, and leading to hopeless devas-

tation and annihilation. The poem closes on an image of madness and aimless wandering, highlighted by the internal half rhyme of *demente, vagante*. The image, besides echoing Hamlet's feigned madness in Shakespeare's tragedy, as well as the sterile meandering of his will, finds a suggestive and direct counterpart in the closing scene of *L'Ambleto*.

Avessi potuto bere anch'io  
non il simbolo vano dell'ultima Cena,  
ma il resto che sui chiodi e sui legni  
s'era aggrumato di sangue,  
sarei diventato un tuo figlio,  
un tuo amante.

Così sono un padre  
che ha generato suo figlio  
con la carne degli altri.  
Pel resto  
sono un orfano cieco,  
demente, vagante.

(Testori 1997, 1029)

[If only could I also have drunk / not the vain symbol of the Last Supper, /  
but the other blood clotted / on nails and wood / I would have become a son  
of yours, / a lover of yours. // This way I am a father / who has given birth to  
his son / through somebody else's flesh. / For the rest / I am a blind orphan, /  
demented and stray.]

### Preserving Contact with Shakespeare's Text

In his incessant reliving and rewriting of the tragedy of Hamlet, however, Testori always keeps in touch with the Shakespearean text, at times even bypassing his own personal rereadings. An interesting example of this is offered by a lapidarian poem from *Per sempre*. The poem is based on an immediately recognisable reference to the famous scene of Hamlet holding the skull of his dead jester Yorick at the beginning of Act 5 in *Hamlet*. In this poem the Shakespearean episode is effectively condensed into a few vivid lines. The essential elements are evoked through the opening imperative form of the verb "stringere" [to clasp] and through the images of the skull and the hand, both emphasised by their end-of-line position. The skull is then further stressed by a metonymical repetition at the beginning of the second strophe (in the sense that by losing its flesh, a head becomes a skull and evokes death), while "mano" [hand] rhymes with the closing "t'amo" [I love you], which after all is the synthesis of Hamlet's fond memory of the beloved old jester. However, compared to Shakespeare's Hamlet, roles are inverted here: it is not Hamlet but the skull that speaks, and this time it is with the skull that the poet identifies, rather than with the Hamlet-like person holding it.

Stringimi il teschio  
nella mano.

Quando non avrò carne  
ti dirò ancora:  
t'amo.

(Testori 1997, 834)

[Clasp my skull / in your hands. // When I am fleshless / I'll go on telling  
you: / I love you.]

Surprisingly, there is no trace of the Yorick episode in either the 1970 screenplay or in *L'Ambleto*. Therefore, it is even more significant that we should encounter it in one of Testori's last lyric texts, namely the poem written for a collection of engravings by Gabai. The poem is worth returning to here again, since we can now appreciate how the metatextual dimension of the poem underlines the intercourse between the different layers of Testori's personal reading of the figure of Hamlet. There is an apparently neat boundary between the first seven lines that refer to the Yorick scene in Shakespeare's text and lines 8 to 11 which openly refer to *L'Ambleto*. In fact, the intertextual discourse is much more subtle. It is true that the first part points to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, but the web of extratextual echoes is further enriched by allusions to Testori's own works. The noun used for *skull* is the Lombard word "crapa" [head] which regularly occurs in *L'Ambleto*. Moreover, it should be noted that the closing image of the poem is the "final feto", which clearly evokes the decaying foetus into which Hamlet's father had regressed in Testori's 1970 screenplay.

La muta crepa  
della crapa,  
la crapa,  
la sua crepa.  
il frantumarsi  
degli ossi arsi  
nella man d'Amleto...

Amleto  
o, così vicino com'è  
a Lombardia, Ambleto?  
D'una vita  
comunque  
il resto, il testo  
e il final feto...

(Testori 2002, 192)

[The silent crack / of the skull, / the skull, / its crack, / the cracking / of  
parched bones / in Hamlet's hand... / Hamlet / or as close as he is / to  
Lombardy, Ambleto? / Of a life / anyway / the remains, the text / and the  
final foetus...]

## Postmodernism and beyond

Testori's very personal experience of Hamlet could be seen as one of many fashionable rereadings of archetypal characters from European literature. In a certain sense, it is in line with those experiences in metacultural and metatheatrical dimensions which were so typical of the closing decades of the twentieth century. Equally, it could be classified as a product of the postmodern tendency to crash and mix distant temporal stratifications, by taking up distant traditions, texts or styles and, by swallowing or grinding them, reviving them. In a certain sense, that is what Testori actually does. Yet, although certainly influenced by his contemporary cultural panorama, Testori is actually moved by different motivations (see Taffon 23–24, 60). His reasons, far from being cerebral, are, rather, deeply rooted in his inner self, or, to use Testori's own imagery, in his own flesh. He presents his relation with Hamlet as passionately physical and intimate:

Credo che l'Amleto rappresenti un personaggio oltre il quale non si può andare, ma proprio per questo può diventare, anzi è diventato, uno stato della coscienza umana. A voce ho detto che l'ho preso a schiaffi. Non è vero. È stato quando il mio amore è arrivato, per usare un'immagine fisica, ad un rapporto quasi 'da letto', che è venuto fuori come un figlio bastardo dal grandissimo, esitante e splenetico Amleto di Shakespeare il mio turpe, blasfemo, disperato Ambleto di Lomazzo. (Testori 2002, 177)

[I believe that Hamlet stretches character to the limits, and for this very reason he may become, or rather he has already become part of our human consciousness. Once, speaking, I said that I have slapped his face. That is not true. To use a physical image, it was when my love reached a point to almost 'go to bed' with him, that my vile, blasphemous and desperate Ambleto from Lomazzo was born, like a bastard son of Shakespeare's greatest, hesitating and splenetic Hamlet.]

Thus Hamlet becomes for Testori a key landmark in his own existential quest and in his never-ending questioning of the meaning of life and history. It should be clear by now that what he chases is not Shakespeare's hero, or rather, it is through the Shakespearean splenetic prince that he tries to get to the central theme, to the heart of Hamlet's tragedy, which for him has gained mythical and anthropological dimensions. This explains why Testori starts by committing himself to the classic text, "Il testo che io amo di più" [the text I love most] (Doninelli 51), but soon creeps to the Shakespearean hero, or rather he penetrates him, openly, shockingly, violently. As we have seen, however, the result is that Hamlet also indelibly creeps back into him, inspiring and fertilising all his writing:

[Amleto] è una figura così enorme e così profetica che non ha eguali nella letteratura d'ogni tempo. Inoltre l'Amleto resta ancor oggi la figura più emblematica dell'uomo moderno, tutte quelle che son venute dopo sono in fondo delle varianti. Sbagliano quei critici [T. S. Eliot] che osservano come l'*Amleto* non sia la più perfetta stilisticamente e formalmente delle tragedie shakespeariane. [. . .] Ma se è proprio quella la sua forza. La grandezza

dell'*Amleto* è tutta in questo rompersi della dimensione formale che si lascia trapassare e fa spazio all'urlo profetico che l'opera propriamente contiene ed esprime [. . .]. La vera struttura dell'*Amleto* è la totalità con cui ripropone il cuore del problema umano, è quella suprema domanda sul senso dell'essere. Questa domanda, poi, nell'*Amleto* di Shakespeare non è posta in termini astratti o sfuggenti, ma è urlata dentro il rapporto tra padre e figlio che è luogo realistico, carnale e umano. (Testori, *Dall'Amleto* 14)

[(Hamlet) is such a huge and prophetic figure that there is no equal in any literature whatsoever. Moreover Hamlet is the most emblematic figure of modern man. After all, those that follow are all variants of him. Critics are wrong [T. S. Eliot] to observe that *Hamlet*, both stylistically and formally, is not the best tragedy by Shakespeare. [. . .] Yet that is its very point of strength. What makes *Hamlet* great is its fragile formal dimension that allows penetration and makes room for the prophetic cry at the core of the play [. . .]. The authentic structure of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is the absoluteness of the way in which the play poses the essence of the problem of humanity, which is the ultimate question on the meaning of life. Moreover, this question in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is not posed in an abstract or elusive way. It is rather shouted within the father-son relationship which is a realistic, fleshy and human reality.]

### The Dream of Translation as Survival

Testori's relationship with Hamlet as both text and character is the coherent result of an approach to literature and art, which centres on themes rather than texts, as Testori explains in an essay on Francesco del Cairo's painting. Testori makes the point that a theme is not a frozen entity and cannot ever be fixed:

Partendo da un tema così come la storia glielo consegna, l'artista enuncia l'immagine sua, che diremo nuova, pur nuova non essendo al tutto mai, e nel frattempo il *quantum* che dentro la sua opera risulta nuovo ricade sull'entità *in progress* del tema. [. . .] Il tema è il nucleo permotore: la fantasia ne viene stimolata—e la carne anche, del poeta [. . .]. Ché il tema, i temi, sono i coaguli primi dell'uomo, depositatisi quand'esso apparve e quand'esso operò [. . .]. Un tema è aperto a tutte le successive possibilità [. . .] occorre appena con quel tal stimolo; o urto; o applicazione inesorabile d'amore. Eros, appunto è la furia che, nella debolezza o nell'urlo, abbranca tema e poeta e li feconda. (Qtd. in Taffon 24)

[Moving from a theme as history hands it down, the artist states his/her image. We call it new, although it is never thoroughly new. In the meantime the quantum which is new in his/her work reverberates on the in-progress entity. [. . .] The theme is the driving force: imagination is stimulated—as well as the poet's flesh [. . .]. Because a theme, all themes, are man's first clots, created when he first appeared and acted [. . .]. A theme is open to all subsequent possibilities [. . .] a certain stimulus is necessary; or a jolt; or fatal love. Actually, it is Eros, the Fury that grabs both poet and theme and fertilises them, in their weakness or in their shouting.]

In the last sentence of the passage we run across the same erotic metaphors used for his fertile relationship with Hamlet. It is this figurative language and the idea of a very intimate and physical relationship between poet and character that could suggest a certain degree of similarity with postcolonial so-called cannibalistic translation. Postcolonial movements have recourse to the metaphor of cannibalism to define an approach to the foreign text and literature that does not deny the other's strength nor suppress foreign influences or nourishment, but rather feeds on them, trying to absorb and transform them by the addition of autochthonous input (Vieira Ribeiro Pires 98–99; see also Munday 137). However, unlike with so-called cultural cannibalism, Testori does not conceive of the core nucleus, the theme of a text or character, as a static entity to be swallowed up. He rather sees it as something essentially in progress. Thus, according to Testori, the relation between theme and poetic recreation must be one of reciprocal benefit. Moreover, we have seen how Testori's Hamlet becomes a complex and collective expression of the human conscience, a nucleus and a theme. We can say that the Shakespearean hero has actually entered the world of myth with Testori, without, however, being swallowed up and swept away by unstoppable metamorphoses. Testori never cuts the vital contact with Shakespeare's text, which contributes to guaranteeing and preserving the relevance of Hamlet's myth.

On the other hand, Testori is sceptical about the traditional interlingual transfer of a foreign text, specifically of a masterpiece like Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

Non bisogna [. . .] dimenticare che non si possono tradurre i grandi testi teatrali senza sminuirli. *Amleto* recitato in italiano è uno sfocatissimo ricordo dell'*Amleto* di Shakespeare. (Testori 1996, 101)

[We should not forget that great theatre cannot be translated without diminishing it. *Hamlet* performed in Italian is not much more than a very pale shadow of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*].

Testori has produced only one work of translation as interlingual transfer proper, namely the poetic translation of St. Paul's first Letter to the Corinthians. As Bo comments, he tries to act as a translator of Paul through Paul. Although willing to talk in Paul's voice, once again his personal drama and despair fill and inhabit Paul's words (Bo 78). In the case of *Hamlet*, Testori's position is more complex and subtle at the same time. As we have seen, his is a lifelong and intimate relationship that finds its expression in more than one text and in different forms. It crosses the borders of translation, if translation is conceived as an interlingual relation between texts, or even between semiotic codes. It is more appropriate to refer to Testori's experience as a form of translational process. Yet probably not even the broad categories of rereading and rewriting can satisfactorily define Testori's approach to *Hamlet*. The poet's meeting with the nucleus, the core theme, is so rich and fertile for him that translation as rewriting evolves into translation as writing. This hypothesis finds corroboration in Testori's own words. He begins his programmatic "Il ventre del teatro" ["The Belly of the Theatre"] reflecting on the paradox of a theatre company that instead of staging a play, for example, by Luigi



Pirandello, decides to perform one of the “esalazioni concettuali” [the cerebral outpourings] from that text and author. This leads Testori to question the concept of rewriting, and rather opt for writing, in the name of a deeper and more subtle form of adherence.

Vien [. . .] da chiedersi cosa mai sarebbe accaduto ove la tradizione della perenne dialettica [. . .] tra testo e spettacolo [. . .] avesse più pesato sul testo che sullo spettacolo. In altre parole, ove fosse stato nell’abitudine d’una compagnia [. . .] allestire, anziché Pirandello, Alfieri, che sarebbe accaduto qualora [. . .] quella Compagnia si fosse indotta a riprendere una della tante ‘esalazioni’ concettuali del drammaturgo siciliano? Sarebbe stato possibile ‘riscrivere’ o, invece, alla luce di quella tradizione, si sarebbe dovuto pienamente e totalmente ‘scrivere’ [. . .] ? (Testori 1996, 33–34).

[This naturally leads us to wonder what would have happened if the tradition of the eternal tension between text and performance had weighed more on the text rather than on the performance. In other words, what would have happened if it had been the habit of a theatre company not to stage Pirandello, or Alfieri, but rather to take up again one of the numerous ‘cerebral outpourings’ of the Sicilian playwright? Would it have been possible to ‘rewrite’, or, instead, in the light of that tradition, should we have fully and thoroughly ‘written’?]

From this perspective, we can say that Testori’s never-ending dialogue with *Hamlet* actually falls within the broad spectrum of cultural translation (see Pym 146). Rather than a transfer from a source to a target, translation can also be seen as a journey and a continuous process of displacement and evolution, as the very title chosen by Testori for his last theatrical encounter with Hamlet appears to stress. *Post-Hamlet*, while evoking the *Ur-Hamlet* from which the Shakespearean play evolved, and thus looking back before Shakespeare himself, implicitly highlights the circularity of a never-ending artistic process (Testori *Dell’Amleto*, 14). An often quoted passage by Homi Bhabha helps to synthesise Testori’s striking relationship with Hamlet:

If hybridity is heresy, then to blaspheme is to dream. To dream not of the past or present, nor the continuous present [. . .] it is the dream of translation as ‘survival’, as Derrida translates the ‘time’ of Benjamin’s concept of the after-life, as *sur-vivre*, the act of living on borderlines [. . .] an empowering condition of hybridity; an emergence that turns ‘return’ into reinscription and re-description; an iteration that is not belated, but ironic and insurgent. (Bhabha 324)

The occurrence of expressions like “to blaspheme” or “insurgent” perfectly matches Testori’s own language. Besides that, it is the emphasis on the “empowering condition of hybridity” as the key for “the dream of translation as ‘survival’”, which throws a final light on Testori’s Hamlet. Through the Italian poet’s approach, Hamlet lives “on borderlines” and even incarnates hybridity. In Testori’s lifelong artistic quest, Hamlet not only blurs cultural, temporal and spatial borders, but he

also transgresses fixed notions about gender (like Testori himself, his Hamlet is homosexual), as well as about genres (theatre and poetry). By hybridising and finding new voices in the dramatic dimensions of lyric discourse, Testori provides us with a vivid example of how the splenetic prince can be translated and can eternally live on, *sur-vivre*.

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